

Have Christians Already Received Eternal Life?

By Robert L. Whitelaw

Jesus often spoke of God's work of regeneration, performing a new birth within believers and resulting in eternal life (e.g., John 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24, 25; 11:25). It is also true that Paul says that being "in Christ" is being "a new creature" (II Cor. 5:17). At the same time, though, both Jesus and the epistles speak unequivocally of the death of the saints, meaning real death and burial, just as we have seen happen to all since Adam. Speaking of Lazarus and of every saint yet to die, Jesus said, "though he were dead, yet shall he live." Speaking of the dead — including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He spoke of the time "when they shall rise from the dead" (Mark 12:25–27). Paul agreed in Romans 5:12, I Corinthians 15:22, etc.

Hence, we must reconcile these two undeniable facts: all in Adam die; all in Christ are guaranteed eternal life.

CERTAINTY OF ETERNAL LIFE

The answer is that God often in the Old Testament, and Jesus in his ministry, often spoke of guaranteed future events in the present tense, or as already true, both with respect to future punishment and future blessing. By "dead in trespasses and sins," God means "under sentence of death." By "let the dead bury their dead," Jesus meant "let those under the sentence of death bury those now really dead."

Likewise when Jesus spoke of "having eternal life," a study of every such passage will show it always means "having the guarantee of eternal life (immortality) on the resurrection day to come. This is the figure of speech called "prolepsis", speaking of things to come as though they were present or even past. See Romans 4:17; Psalm 2:6; Isaiah 42:1. Even we use this form of speech when we say to a person, "Are you flying to Chicago?" while we see the person standing on the ground in front of us!

This then is why Jesus is spoken of as "the first fruits from the dead" and the "first resurrection," because his resurrection must come first in order to guarantee ours. "Because I (shall) live, you shall live also!" is proleptic of Christ's resurrection, a literal future of ours.

GOD VIEWS US AS "HAVING" ETERNAL LIFE

Thus God, on the basis of Christ's atonement certified by his resurrection, can look upon each of his children in this life as "having eternal life" (John 5:24). And in John 5:25 when Jesus says, "the hour is coming and...now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live," he clearly means: (1) some of those under Adam's sentence of death shall be given the spiritual "hearing" that leads to saving faith in Christ (see Rom. 10:17), and (2) those who give evidence of this faith shall receive eternal life on resurrection day, guaranteed right now by new life and victory over sin, through Christ's indwelling in this present life. Yet, all those spoken of in John 5:25 will truly die, sleep in Christ in hades (I Cor. 15:54–58) and be raised by his call on that day. If that were not so, it would not be resurrection day.

In Ephesians 2:5–8, we have another example of proleptic speech: (1) "We were dead in sins" means that we were under sentence of death though still alive; (2) "Has

quickened us with Christ” means that Christ’s past resurrection guarantees our future resurrection; (3) “Has raised us up...and made us sit...in heavenly places” has both a present meaning (in the spiritual dimension) and a future reality on resurrection day.

FITS GOSPEL AGE MILLENNIUM

I find that prolepsis helps me to understand the millennium in Revelation 20:5–6. We who have been given “new life in Christ” by power to conquer sin in this life, are spoken of as “reigning with him” now — each of us in our allotted span during this Gospel Age millennium of “thousands of years,” and are spoken of as “risen with Christ” because his resurrection (past) guarantees ours on resurrection day. Christ is presently ruling over heaven and earth (matt. 28:18–19). And we now serve him as “kings and priests” (Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6).

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